

THE HISTORY OF BIRD-PHOTOGRAPHY IN INDIA

BY

R. S. P. BATES & E. H. N. LOWTHER

(*With seven plates*)

It is indeed possible that photographs of Indian birds, or of their nests and eggs, appeared in other publications before ornamenting the pages of this journal, but we believe the contingency to be remote. In any case, even if such were the case, their numbers must have been very small. Consequently we have confined our researches into the history of bird-photography in India to the pages of our *Journal*, and since records indicate that the nest and eggs even of a British bird were photographed for the first time in April 1892, by Cherry Kearton, and of a bird at its nest not till the spring of 1895 (in this instance by that other great pioneer of bird photography, R. B. Lodge) we feel it is improbable that much, if indeed any, bird photography had been done in India earlier than 1900. We have therefore not looked through the *Journal* published prior to that year¹.

Neither of us being lucky enough to possess a complete set of the *Journal*, we repaired to the library of the South Kensington Natural History Museum where we spent two happy days browsing through their interesting pages, being afforded every assistance by Mr. Townsend, the Librarian, and by his staff. Often did we stray from our subject to read to each other scraps of absorbing interest, and as frequently did we have to pull ourselves up with a jerk to ensure completion of our task in the limited time at our disposal. As may be imagined nostalgic memories overcame us again and again, but we learnt much.

Some of what we learnt surprised us not a little, for it was not until we reached the fourth part of Volume 21 (November 1912) that we made our first discovery, a photograph by Magrath purporting to show the site of a bird's nest—that of the Orange Bullfinch. 'Purporting to show' is the right expression, for the photograph, or else its reproduction—a very possible contingency—is so poor that even a cross to show the nest's position entirely fails to give a clue

¹ Since this article went to press my attention has been drawn to a few photographs in the pages of the *Journal* which we appear to have missed out in our survey. One or two of these have perhaps been omitted in error, but others were undoubtedly rejected for technical or other reasons. The sudden death of my great friend and collaborator, Bob Lowther, renders it inadvisable, in my opinion, to make any alteration in this paper, but I find that the photograph of the female florican on nest in Vol. XXI (July 1912) is reproduced excellently at page 207 of Vol. II of Stuart Baker's *Game Birds of India, Burma and Ceylon* where it is credited to H. H. The Maharao of Cutch. The latter is also responsible for a picture taken on 8th November 1903 (Vol. XV of June 1904) of flamingos' nests and eggs in the Great Rann of Cutch. I would also like to mention F. M. Bailey's Bar-headed Geese photos (Vol. XIX of 1909) and his pictures of the nesting of the Ibisbill taken in May 1909 (Vol. XIX of February 1910).—R.S.P.B.

to the composition of this strange smudge of printer's ink. This, being of a nest, cannot take pride of place as the first published Indian bird photograph. This honour apparently goes to C. Beadon who, to illustrate a Miscellaneous Note in Volume 24 (September 1915), in addition to pictures of a nest and eggs of the Common Sandgrouse, has one of the bird itself on the nest. Admittedly there are earlier photographs than those named, as for example that of a Ram Chukar taken in 1912, but these are of captive or wounded birds and as such should not, in our view, be included in this brief sketch, since bird photography, as understood by its devotees, means the portrayal of wild birds in their natural surroundings and under no form of human control.

From 1915 onwards, until some time after the close of the Great War, nature photographs were used only sporadically, but in 1921 [Volume 27 (3)] there appeared an article which conveys the impression that the author's intent was to give to photography its due importance in supplementing the written word. This article, 'A List of the Birds of Dharmasala,' by Captain R. W. G. Hingston, was illustrated with 6 photographs, about quarter plate in size, of various nests and of a couple of birds—a Brownbacked Indian Robin and a young Himalayan Snowcock, the latter poorly reproduced. This article was the forerunner of those illustrated ornithological papers of both scientific and of a more popular nature which thereafter formed a steady if somewhat thin trickle up to the present day.

Up to this time the photographers' technique and the quality of reproduction left a great deal to be desired, but with the inception of E. H. N. Gill's 'A Description of the Nests and Eggs of the Common Birds occurring in the Plains of the United Provinces,' [Volume 28 (4) dated December 1922] a new era was ushered in. It is true that these photographs were still mainly of nests, but there is a crispness of definition and attention to composition about them, and those of the few bird photographs he included, which were previously altogether lacking. Unfortunately Gill's enthusiasm for ornithology appears to have waned with the conclusion of these articles, and by 1924 he had faded entirely from the Indian scene.

As Gill's articles were drawing to a close, one of the present authors, R. S. P. Bates, stepped into the breach, first with 'Notes on Hugh Whistler's "A Contribution to the Ornithology of Kashmir",' a short article with one plate depicting nearly life-size photographs of the nests and eggs of the Sooty and Whitebrowed Blue Flycatchers, and then, shortly afterwards [Volume 29 (4) May 1924] with the first of a series on 'Birds' Nesting with a Camera in India'. This series, in 6 parts, lasted until August 1926, and was written with the express purpose of popularizing the photographing of India's birds and to encourage the use of photographs in furthering bird study. We have repeatedly been told that, more than anything else published up to that time, it did focus attention on India's teeming and varied bird life and caused many to turn their attention to the birds around them, some for relaxation, some in a more serious manner, while the fillip it gave to those who were already bird enthusiasts was considerable. Perhaps few were induced to take up bird photography, but nevertheless from now on there was a small but noticeable



Photo

C. L. Boyle

Little Bittern (*Ixorbrychus minuta*)



Photo

The Indian River Tern (*Sterna aurantia*)

R. S. P. Bates



Photo

Scully's Wood Owl (*Strix aluco biddulphi*)

R. S. P. Bates



Photo

Brown-winged or Bridled Tern (*Sterna anaethetus*) in flight

C. A. Gibson-Hill